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KGB chief 'laundering' self for top job

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MOSCOW — Yuri Andropov, the head of the Soviet secret police, the dreaded KGB, has always been a puzzle to Western Kremlin watchers.

The public record suggests a ruthless man with much blood on his hands. As ambassador to Budapest in 1954, the tall, scholarly-looking Andropov helped stage the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Later, as KGB chief, he was deeply involved in the Afghanistan invasion and the military takeover in Poland.

Here at home, Andropov, 67, presided over the harsh, systematic crackdown that has virtually destroyed the Soviet dissident movement and sent many of its leaders to labor camps or into Siberian exile.

In spite of all this, there somehow persists a radically different impression of the private Andropov, who is said to be the most urbane and sophisticated Kremlin figure, a collector of art, a connoisseur of fine wines, a man who reads good literature, not political tracts — much like the KGB chief depicted by Frederick Forsyth in "The Devil's Alternative."

BASED ON his speeches and information from Soviet sources, some Western analysts even suspect that, in his heart, Andropov might be one of the more pragmatic and tolerant of the top officials here.

Getting a better fix on the real Andropov has suddenly become a principal concern of Kremlin watchers. According to reliable Soviet sources, Andropov has emerged from the Kremlin infighting of recent weeks as a much more powerful figure and has positioned himself to make a grab for the number one job, General Secretary of the Communist Party, should Leonid Brezhnev suddenly depart the political scene.

One well-placed Soviet source reports that Andropov will soon leave his KGB post to head up the powerful ideological apparat, a position which Brezhnev was apparently trying to win for his long-time protege, Konstantin Chernenko.

If Andropov does make this move, he

will be trying to put some distance between himself and his secret police past, since it is generally assumed here that no man can move directly from the KGB post to top man in the Communist Party. This is a legacy of the virulent abuse of the KGB during the Stalinist era.

THE IDEOLOGY job was left vacant in January by the death of Mikhail Suslov, the former number two Soviet leader. Kremlinologists believe that Brezhnev's efforts on Chernenko's behalf, which were aimed at appointing him as heir apparent, touched off the current power struggle.

Soviet sources say that the Chernenko ploy provoked bitter opposition within the ruling Politburo, and that both Andropov and Defense Minister Dmitry Ustinov moved to intervene. Chernenko's chances were dealt a serious blow when Brezhnev reportedly took ill at the end of March after a stroke-like attack, and dropped from public view for almost a month, the sources maintain.

The 70-year-old Chernenko, who has been Brezhnev's aide de camp for more than three decades, had a surprisingly high profile during February and March, and Soviet sources said that he was doing Suslov's job on a temporary basis.

But as soon as Brezhnev became ill, reportedly while flying back to Moscow from Central Asia on March 25, Chernenko also dropped from public view. Kremlinologists saw this as further proof that Chernenko, unlike Andropov and Ustinov, has no power base of his own and is dependent upon Brezhnev for any further advancement.

BREZHNEV IS said by Soviet sources to have experienced "spasms of the blood vessels of the brain" after maintaining a grueling schedule for a man in his frail health throughout most of March. Reportedly, he did so in order to dispell the impression that he is no longer strong enough to handle his job, and to convince those opposed to Chernenko's elevation that he was still a force to be reckoned with.

Brezhnev finally reappeared last Thursday afternoon at a gala Kremlin ceremony marking the birthday of Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state. He looked thinner and more feeble, but he walked erect and needed assistance only when he climbed steps. He clearly had the use of both arms and was able to turn his head in both directions, which most likely could not have been the case if he had suffered a serious stroke, as some Western press reports claimed. Brezhnev's attendance at the televised fete came as a surprise to many Westerners here, because a spate of rumors that he was near death had spread through Moscow in the days just before, and even many ordinary Soviet citizens were convinced that his passing was imminent.

THE LENIN'S DAY rite held a second surprise as well, the selection of Andropov to deliver the prestigious anniversary speech. In retrospect some Kremlin watchers believe that this was the more significant development, since it indicated that the KGB chief had the clout to push himself forward at a highly critical time when the whole country was thinking about the post-Brezhnev succession and wondering who might replace him.

"This has to be seen as a signal that Andropov is now one of the key players," a skilled Western analyst explained. "If he weren't, other politburo members would have blocked him. You can be sure that they all wanted to give that speech."

Taken together with the earlier reports from Soviet sources that Andropov was about to become a much more visible figure, Western analysts saw his selec-

tion to make the speech as indicative of a political ascendancy.

But they cautioned that it is still too soon to write Chernenko off or make too much of Andropov's chances. The fate of the former still depends to a great extent on Brezhnev's health, they believe, and if the 75-year-old Soviet leader comes back to form, which is now considered rather unlikely, the political picture will be wide open, they expect.

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